The Demography Of The Greco-Roman World

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A note on the translation

The translation has been carried out from the work:
Karl Julius Beloch, "Die Bevölkerung der griechisch-römischen Welt", Duncker & Humblot, 1886[1]

No real analysis of the Roman population can be or has been undertaken without using Beloch's work as reference. Either some element in his method is attacked, his estimates are increased, or decreased, or some new tool that was not available to him has been employed.
No scholar has before or since written such a comprehensive work in this area.
Therefore it deserves a translation, and also a translation of a more professional character than has been attempted here.

The translation has aimed at a translation for understanding, and not as such a loyal translation related to the german original formulation.

The list of 'Contents' have been preserved in the manner Beloch designed it, as it gives the reader much information as to the structure and method of the work. Page numbers have been omitted, as any elementary search-function should render even more accessibility.

Latin has been translated where possible, with the note that it is not done in the original. Greek is only translated where it is absolutely necessary for the context - referenced quotes are not translated and not included.

As far as possible the original geographical names have been translated to english equivalents, or sometimes a more recent name has been used designating the same area.

Hals, 2024
Ulrik Vachet Rasmussen

[1] A version can be found on archive.org, but digitized originals are available in many places for free. https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_rIQfAAAAMAAJ/page/n6/mode/1up?view=theater

Preface.

Economic history is only just emerging as a science. Yes, perhaps its most important branch, the theory of historical demography, has so far not been treated in a scientific manner. There is certainly no lack of input of
individual research; but the attempt has never been made
To treat and handle the population movement on extensive areas and for a longer period of time, in a systematic manner, and a critical review of the entire presently existing material. However, only in this way do we arrive at a real understanding of history and creating a sustainable theory of demography.

This volume undertakes to fulfill this task for the cultural circle of the Greco-Roman world, if not solving the task, then at least bringing it closer to a solution. The time limits were determined by the nature of the source material. With the exception of the Persian Wars, our knowledge of history is so meager that it is impossible to gain more than a very general idea of population conditions. And again, during the period of the decline of ancient culture, since the middle of the first century AD, the population statistics are so sparse that at least for now, any kind of reliable results could not be achieved. Between the census of Claudius and the Domesday book of William the Conqueror lies the dark period for the population history of Europe.

It goes without saying that a study of this kind can only produce approximate values. In order to make this apparent, I have used round numbers throughout, which has occasionally led to small inconsistencies that I have intentionally not eliminated. Of course, the degree of reliability of the results achieved varies greatly. For easily apparent reasons, it is greatest for the free population of the Greek peninsula and Italy: here the margin of error should hardly exceed 25% either upwards or downwards. The estimates of the number of slaves and the population of the other countries around the Mediterranean are much more uncertain; errors of up to 50%, and in some cases even more, may have been made. However, it is probable that these errors partly compensate for each other according to the "law of large numbers", so that the overviews on pages 506 and 507 should give a picture of the population situation in the ancient world that is at least in the main features accurate.

My results will undoubtedly be met with widespread opposition: they partly contradict old and deeply rooted views. I too have long been under the spell of these prejudices and only completely freed myself from them in the course of the work, when all the material was in front of me. Perhaps this material will have the same effect on others. But whoever attempts to refute me will not have to direct his attack at individual points, but at the entire structure of my work, whose elements support each other; it will be a matter of replacing this system with another, better one. And since it is unlikely that anyone will raise the accusation against me that I have significantly overestimated the population of the ancient world as a whole, it will be the task of my possible opponents to prove that the states of antiquity had a considerably higher population than I assumed. We will then see which system is in better harmony with the sources and with the general principles of Demographic theory.

Of course, even those who accept my results on the whole will find many things to improve and supplement in detail. The population statistics material from antiquity has never been collected in anything approaching completeness; and even though I myself have devoted years of attention to these questions, it would be strange if I had not overlooked anything. I have, however, intentionally suppressed much that seemed less important to me in order not to make the volume of citations in the book any larger. In other respects, too, I have

endeavored to be as brief as possible, and in particular in the recurring calculations of the total population from the number of citizens or the number of men of military age, I have generally only given the elements of the calculation and the result. I have also counted on readers who are at least familiar with the basic concepts of political economy and population statistics. - It would be particularly desirable if area and local statistics were further investigated; but unfortunately there is little hope that many of our philologists will take up the planimeter.

There are, however, also people who shrug their shoulders at any study of population statistics from the area of antiquity. This is, of course, very cheap wisdom. Our material is certainly poor compared to what is available to us in our time; but are we giving up researching the political history of Greece and Rome because the archives of the Metroon and the Capitol have been lost, apart from a few ruins; and because the ancients hardly knew what we today understand as the science of history? By the way, no matter how negatively we may oppose historical population statistics, still we cannot do without them. There is no major work on ancient history that does not contain a large amount of statistical data, even if it is only data on the strength of armies; and no one will want to banish these figures from history. However, the crudest empiricism still prevails in their use, and gross errors can be found even in our best works. Is it not desirable that all of the numerical data handed down should be processed in a critical manner?

What Polybius wrote against Phylarchus two thousand years ago is unfortunately still partly relevant today:

“but in spite of this, does he not admire the inexperience and ignorance of the common sense about the Greek things of patronage and power? In fact, despite the historians, they exist.” (translated from greek by Ulrik Rasmussen)

Of course, the accusation affects our science as a whole more than the individuals. May these studies help to ensure that the accusation no longer has any justification.

Frascati, June 1886.

Julius Beloch

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First Chapter

Sources and Tools

1. Population statistics in antiquity.

The need for administration led to the beginnings of official population statistics in antiquity at an early stage. With the great privileges that were granted everywhere by the possession of citizenship, the first thing that had to be done was to establish the circle of those entitled by means of unequivocal documents. However, the possession of citizenship was tied to citizenship; it was therefore necessary to ensure that no dispute could arise over whether a child was born to parents who had citizenship. This could only be achieved by officially maintained birth registers, which we must therefore assume to exist in all major Greek and Italian states, although details about this institution are only known from Athens and Rome. In Athens, it was the phratries that were entrusted with maintaining these registers; the assembled members of the phratry were also entitled to check whether the child proposed for entry in the register was of legitimate civil descent or not. There was no specific time limit for registration; as a rule, it took place as soon as possible after birth, but later registration was not excluded[2]. In Rome it is said that Servius Tullius had already ordered to count a gift to the temple of Juno Lucina for every birth[3]. Over time, this custom developed into actual birth registers: according to a decree of the Emperor Marcus, every birth had to be registered with the ‘Praefectus aerarii Saturni’ within 30 days, and similar arrangements were made in the provinces[4].

In contrast, the need for official death lists only arose much later. In Athens, deaths were not yet recorded at the time of the Peloponnesian War, as is evident from the fact that Thucydides was able to give an exact number of hoplites and riders who died of the plague, but marked the number of victims from other sections of the population as "undetermined"[5]. And we do not know whether Athens later proceeded to keep official death registers. In Rome, Servius Tullius is also said to have prescribed a donation to the Temple of Libitina for every death[6]. This too later led to the development of official lists[7].

Furthermore, it was necessary to know the number of those who were qualified to actively exercise citizenship. For this purpose, each of the political communities — demes — into which Attica had been divided by Cleisthenes had a list in which every young Athenian belonging to the demos, approximately 17 years old, was included[8]. This entry established

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[2] For more details, see Gilbert, Staatsalterthümer 1 p. 134 f.
[3] Piso in Dionysius IV 15.
[4] Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Vita M. Antonini 9
[5] Thuk. III 87. Compare with Müller-Strübing, Aristophanes, page 642.
[6] Dionysus a. a. 0.
[7] Suet. Nero 39. Compare Hieronymus 214, 1 (Eusebius II, p. 159, Schoene): “A great plague had occurred, so that for many days in the ensuing year about ten thousand men were reported to have died.” (translated from latin, not done in the original)

[8] Since the entry in the birth registers of the Phratries was not tied to a specific age, this could also be the case with the entry in the citizen lists of the demes; the decisive factor was rather the physical development (Arist. Wespen 578)

political rights and civil legal maturity; control over the qualifications of those to be admitted lay with the assembled citizens of the demos. On the basis of these lists
the list of citizens entitled to participate in the popular assembly was then compiled[9]. It made it possible to obtain an approximate overview of the total number of Attic citizens, even if the number thus obtained was far from being absolutely accurate. On the one hand, the list did not include all those citizens who had temporarily or permanently lost their political rights; on the other hand, given the lack of official death registers, it was inevitable that the names of many of those who had already died were continued in the registers (πίναξ ἐκκλησιαστικὸς). Similar lists must be assumed for the other Greek democracies; in oligarchic states, the registers (πίναξ ἐκκλησιαστικὸς) were of course restricted to the privileged class.

Lists of a different kind were required for the military administration. Every year the highest military authority - in Athens the strategos, in Boeotia the polemarchs, etc. - drew up a list of young men who were reaching military age, and who were capable of serving the state in heavy armour or as horsemen. These lists formed the basis for the recruitment; because of their importance, it became customary from the end of the 4th century onwards to have them carved in stone and displayed publicly, and it is thanks to this custom that a large number of them, particularly from Athens and Boeotia, have preserved for us investigate today. Since the Athenian citizen was obliged to serve for 42 years, the total military strength of the state can be calculated when the lists of the last 42 years are added together. It was of course necessary that all departures due to death, implementation in the cleruchies etc., were recorded precisely, and that on the other hand, the arrivals through the admission of wealthy thetes, the granting of citizenship or isotelia to foreigners were taken into account. The recordings thus formed were simply left in the "catalogue"; Thucydides took his information on Athens' military strength and on losses due to the plague from it. Furthermore, since the wealthier relatives were also obliged to serve as hoplites, an analogous list had to be kept of them too. On the other hand, Athens, at least since the Periclean period, did not maintain regular light troops, with the exception of a small corps of archers; for the citizens of the Thetes class, who were exempted from serving as hoplites at their own expense, lists were only kept for military purposes insofar as they were provided with heavy armour by the state.

The lists discussed met all the administrative requirements and did not give rise to a need for periodic censuses of the population. Thus, the first census in Athens, of which we know, was only carried out under the administration of Demetrius of Phaleron (317 - 307)[10]. It included all classes of the population, citizens, metoecs and slaves, but, as the results obtained prove, only the adult men, while women and children were excluded. We are not informed about the other modalities of the census; but by analogy it can be assumed that the legally belonging population, not the actual present population, was counted. We do not know whether other censuses took place in Athens later; nor whether the example given by Denietrios was followed in other Greek republics. On the other hand, we can assume with certainty that population surveys were carried out in the large states of the Hellenistic period. And here the concept of the total population was indeed included in the statistics. When

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[9] R. g. Leochares (Demosth. 44) 35 p. 1091.

[10] Athens. VI p. 272 B (= Müller, Fr. H. Gr. IV 875 Ctesikles fr. 1). And changes to 115 (Schweighäuser), 116 (Casaubonus), 118 (Scaliger). Why not 117? We only know Ctesicles from Athenaeos; the third book of the Χρονικὰ (annals) also tells of the death of Eumenes I of Pergamon in 241 BC, so Ctesicles can only have written towards the end of the third century at the earliest.

Diodorus, citing the official lists, gives the free population of Alexandria as 300,000[11], it is clear that women and children must be included here. Likewise, when Pliny puts the plebs urbana of Seleucia on the Tigris at 600,000[12]. Diodorus himself says that the news from Hecataeus of Abdera that Egypt had 3 million inhabitants under the first Ptolemy is also to be understood as referring to the total population[13]. It is likely that the Ptolemaic administration here was based on institutions from the Pharaonic period.

The development of the Roman census also dates back to the Hellenistic period. However, these surveys are not on the same level as Demetrios' census, because the purpose of the census was only to determine the number of Roman citizens, while foreigners and slaves were not taken into account. But the periodic repetition of the surveys at short intervals and over four centuries, the large and constantly growing area to which they refer, and finally and above all the fact that here alone we have a relatively rich tradition at our disposal in the field of ancient population statistics, gives the Roman census figures a significance that no other document of this kind from antiquity can match. Further below (Chapter VIII) there is a detailed treatment appropriate to the importance of these census figures.

However, the results of even the most careful of these recordings cannot be placed on a par with the results of our current censuses of today in terms of accuracy. But the statistical material available would have been sufficient to obtain a largely accurate picture of the population situation in the Greco-Roman world. Nor was it in any way withdrawn from public use. In the Greek democracies, where everything was negotiated on the market, the results of the official statistics could of course not be kept secret, and Rome, neither under the rule of the aristocracy nor under the imperial rule, had any reservations about publishing the results of its census. But there are hardly any rough beginnings of a scientific use, or even of a collection of statistical material, to be found in antiquity; the Greeks and Romans had no political arithmetic, just as they had no political economy. They did not, however, fail to recognize the practical importance of statistical knowledge for the statesman and the historian. Socrates, in the Xenophontic Memoirs, already demands that an aspiring public speaker should be well informed about the military power of his own state and of any possible opponents[14]; and ignorance of statistical matters is one of the strongest accusations that Polybius hurls against Phylarchus[15]. But fulfilling these requirements was very difficult for the ancient statesman or researcher. It may be that the political writings of the Peripatetic school contained statistical data, but everyone who was interested in these things would mainly be forced to gather the material themselves, either through personal enquiries or through the study of historians. These are the ruins of the historical literature of antiquity, to which we also owe our knowledge of the population relationships of the ancient world, in the first place.

2. Statistical accounts.

As is well known, numbers are most susceptible to corruption in handwritten traditions. Even in our memory, numbers are much less firmly fixed than words, and it requires the greatest strain of our attention to copy a long series of numbers without errors. Corruptions that have crept into the numerical tradition cannot usually be remedied by assumptions, since we lack

[11] Diod. XVII 52.
[12] Plin. H. N. VI 122.
[13] Diod. I 31, compare with below Cap. VI 4.
[14] Xen. Denkwürd. III 6, 9.
[15] Polyb. II 62, 2

the confirmation that the literal meaning provides when correcting ordinary textual corruptions. Thus, only the epigraphic accounts offer an absolutely secure foundation for our investigations; but unfortunately the population statistics yielded from the inscriptions is very low to date. The ‘Monumentum Ancyranum’ with its census figures, the Greek ephebes and military catalogues, a few scattered details here and there - that is all that the inscriptions tell us about the statistical data. In the main, we are still dependent on the literary tradition.

It is not so much the negligence of the copyists and the corruptions caused by it that make it difficult for us to use the figures that have been handed down. The ancient historians themselves are much more to blame. Our next task must therefore be to examine the credibility of our sources in statistical matters.

The first place in the literature that has come down to us here undoubtedly belongs to Thucydides. More than one passage in his work testifies to how severely he criticized the information provided by his informants and how he preferred to underestimate a number.